

Girl Powered. What is it?

Girl Powered is a phrase that has started to become more prominent in the STEM community, but what does it really mean? Today, when I hear the phrase “Girl Powered” I am torn. Are we teaching the boys to let us participate, teaching the girls that we can do this, or are we just getting the adults caught up in including girls in STEM initiatives? I’ve been raised to believe girls could do anything boys could do, and we often ended that phrase with “better.” Girls can do anything boys can do better. As the oldest of four sisters in a very supportive family it isn’t hard to understand why I added “better” to the end of a common phrase.

Five years ago, I was a black-clothes wearing girl -- the darker the better. Don’t get me wrong; I was not some quiet loner, I just wanted to be more than a “stupid girl” and black was the “manliest” color I could think of. Four years ago, however, pink entered my life. We wanted to fight two stereotypes at once: “pink is for the weak” and “girls don’t belong in STEM.” As an all girls Robotics team, I was fully committed to Girl Powered, right? Did I do enough?

Any diversity initiative needs to specifically target the group that is underrepresented and support that group to raise the bar for all involved. I understand it; but, was I living it?



Let’s go back to the beginning, when I first learned about girls in STEM. My early days of Robotics involved an all girls team! We did it all and we used every opportunity that we could,

being one of just a few girls participating in robotics. We could toss our hair and smile, but we were smiling through the pain of always having the thought in the back of our minds that we would never be as good as the guys. We were treated differently. We were underestimated and looked over, sometimes literally; however, we were unstoppable... State and ultimately, Worlds contestants and all.

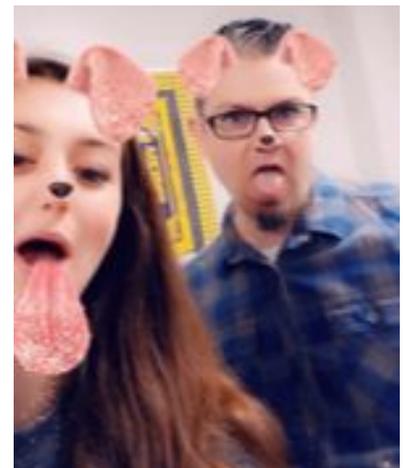


News Update! “All girls team advances to state Robotics Tournament!” We were in the paper, on the news, and the featured team in a local Ford advertisement. As an all girl team, we were the poster girls for Robotics. We were promoting, right? Or were we just the headline? For us to truly include and inspire, we couldn’t just be pretty faces. We talked to young girls about robotics, showing them everything they could gain from the experience, and more often than not, I posed the question, “My little sister will be a Robotics participant, will you?” However, I never asked my little sister about robotics; I just assumed that she already knew how amazing it was. That is one of the major problems, don’t assume; ask her to get involved.

High school is different; we have to integrate with boys! They smell different, give us looks (and now “the looks” have added meanings), still underestimate us, and we're now on the same team. As no longer an enemy, we had an uphill battle to fight for our existence on our own team.

The challenge of this contest was to promote equality; however, is it really equality that we need to promote? The challenge itself says “We strive to encourage equal participation of young women and men in competitive robotics.” Yet, what is equal? Is equal fair or even? Yes, we could count three males and three females on my team as equal. However, is that Girl Powered? I challenge everyone reading this essay to remember that equal is not fair. By definition, fair means that everyone gets what they need or deserve while equal means that everyone gets the same regardless of need. We started with an all girls team five years ago, and we developed the skills and confidence to compete. Yes, we probably demanded more time than our male counterparts of our instructors. Was it equal? No. Was it fair? Yes. Is it Girl Powered? Yes. Sometimes, when working with underrepresented groups, you need to go out of your way to include them so five years from now you can say they are equal so they can become mentors for the next class of teams (for us that means the younger males on our team and the middle school Robotics members).

“Who is your STEM role model and why?” You see this was a difficult question to answer, because the right answer should probably be people like Beth Ford (Land O’ Lakes CEO), Amelia Earhart, or Jane Goodall (scientist). However, it turns out my STEM role model was also my arch nemesis: Stahl (even sounds like a villain, right?). Coach Stahl had the audacity to mix genders on our team. We had a winning team, why would he split us?



Why? Because the world has 50.415% males and 49.585% females; we can't run away from cooties forever. We have to co-exist. He also won't give us the answers, we have to figure it out for ourselves through trial and error. No free passes. "This is so frustrating" and "He hates us because we are girls" followed by, "He really doesn't want girls on this team," are the thoughts that crossed my mind more than once. But not so fast -- Stahl has two young daughters. Maybe he has a bigger plan for us and he wants us to break the Robotics ceiling for them, for us, and for the others who follow. Is he really a friend and not an enemy?

Meet the unstoppable, gender-balanced, age-mixed, 2020 9457X Team. We are all back to wearing black, but now it is because it is our school color.

Meet Thomas. Brother to Bod (2015), Gary (2016), Gilly (2017), and Mike (2018). A tower-building, block-stacking, wheel-turning, finger-pinching, face-slapping, team-effort masterpiece. And a Robot.



Meet Alex. Hockey-playing, snowmobiling, water-skiing, tractor-driving, animal-loving, athletic, middle child. And a Robotier.

Meet Grace. Tennis-playing, instrument-loving, Spanish-speaking, caring older sister, brainiac, babysitter. And a Robitier





Meet Kendyl. She's a star-loving,
choir-singing, fantasy book reading, older
sister to her lil' brother, baking, honest girl.
And a Robotier.

Meet Nolan. Soccer-playing,
dog-loving, youngest brother, skiing, grillin'
and chillin', fish frying, outdoorsy kinda guy.
And a Robotier.



Meet Derek. Hockey-playing, cross country-
running, baseball-playing, sports-watching,
shy, determined, dog-loving, middle child.
And a Robotier.

Meet me, Lauren. I'm a cross-country
running, oldest sister of four girls,
trumpet-playing, book-loving, positive girl
with a little splash of fun. Oh, and I am also a
Robotier.



This team has tried every combination of roles possible and we have come to understand that each of us is a puzzle piece... unique with our strengths and challenges, but together we are a masterpiece.



So, what did we learn? What does Girl Powered really mean? Only time will really tell. Colleges are calling and choices have to be made - for some of us it will be specifically in an engineering pathway and others will use our skills in other industries. However, Robotics has proven the old adage that "it takes a village to raise a child" to be true. We are thankful for the life lessons that have come and gone, the opportunities that have been granted, the support of our families, teachers, coaches and community and we accept the challenge accept to pay it forward in any color of clothing!

Credits:

Team Number: 9457X

Written By: Lauren Reuter

School: Mankato East High School

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